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ABSTRACT

Black educators must act to counter the national trend toward eliminating Afro-American study programs and to preserve these programs as a permanent part of the English literature curriculum. Administrators in predominantly white institutions must be led to understand the importance of black literature to the American experience. To accomplish this goal, black educators must be aware of the history of black studies courses. Although for a time it seemed as if Afro-American literature would be permanently incorporated into the English curriculum sequence, financial difficulties and the demand for practical courses have forced many humanities departments to eliminate all "nonessential" courses. In addition, many black educators have encountered negative experiences when forced to teach in areas other than Afro-American literature; when these teachers are squeezed out, they are seldom replaced. If black studies are to be promoted as a necessary, viable part of the English curriculum, black educators must (1) overcome their feeling of literary inferiority, (2) encourage black writers to publish works of the highest quality, (3) make administrators aware that black writers' works are as important as other American writing, (4) insist that black literature be taught by qualified faculty, and (5) make use of advancements in computer-assisted instruction. (JD)

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Minority Teachers and Afro-American Literature Courses in the Predominantly White University: Saving the Teacher and the Course in the Next 20 Years

Reginald Martin

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The following paper on the state of black studies courses, circa 1984, was delivered at the National Council of Black Studies, Charlotte, North Carolina, February, 1984.

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Minority Teachers and Afro-American Literature Courses in the Predominantly White University: Saving the Teacher and the Course in the Next 20 Years

As Afro-American study programs and individual black studies courses decrease in number across the country, the black teacher finds himself or herself increasingly dependent upon the largesse of English department superiors who have read little Afro-American literature and who doubt its merits; and they find themselves even more commonly teaching in traditionally and predominantly white colleges and universities to audiences which are often doubtful of the teacher's expertise in any area external to Afro-American studies. The black teacher, then, finds himself or herself trapped between two determined, compressing walls: the Afro-American courses they teach are considered not valuable and not an important part of the curriculum, while, at the same time, if these teachers venture away from the teaching of black studies, their scholarly and educative ability is immediately suspect. The most often result of this situation is that, for his or her own sanity's sake, the black teacher allows himself or herself to be squeezed out of the top of these inevitably enclosing walls and is

thankful to be out of teaching in a hostile environment. But, as those of us who teach in colleges for a living know, the vacuum left by these these teachers' abscence is measurably enormous in the social and educational emptiness it stipulates, and, usually, those who set the curriculum make no attempt to fill the empty space. Couple these formidable problems with the fact that, seemingly, an undergraduate English program which hopes to survive into the next century is going to have to turn more and more to technical and business writing and more and more away from literature as a professional staple, and the state of affairs indeed looks bleak for the continued enfranchisement of Afro-American studies as a symbiotic part of the rest of the English curriculum. What can we, as black educators, do to handle the present situation and keep black scholars working; and what can we do to ensure that in the future all people see the importance and necessity of keeping the study of black literature alive? These are questions for which my paper will attempt to give viable and necessary answers.

Symbiotically joined to the steam-gathering civil rights movement of the late 1950s and of the 1960s, was the push in colleges to immediately enfranchise black and other minority literatures. Students demanded--and received--courses which not only miorrored the likenesses of whites, but which also reflected the images of blacks. The push to incorporate Afro-American studies course was no where as strong as it was in the English departments across the country; although the movement was also strong in the social science departments. It was only logical to the students of that time, which now seems so long ago, to demand the most from the departments which boasted of teaching the humanities. Who, more than the English department, which boasted of having a great humanistic and liberal tradition stretching back to the

Greeks, should be the department to take the lead in making the college curriculum more representative of all American students? Thus it was, with, in some cases, amazing rapidity, that English departments from Berkeley to Stonybrook, from Minneapolis to New Orleans, began to develop and implement that most curious hybrid of English courses, the Afro-American literature class. Originally, these classes incorporated not only literature by black Americans, but literature by white abolitionists, Africans, and any number of non-black or non-African Third World writers such as Alan Paton and V.S. Naipaul. Chronologically and thematically arranged, the courses usually began with David Walker or Frederick Douglass; later, the beginnings of the course were supplemented with slave narratives and "jes grew" gospel songs, as the flood of Afro-American literature scholarship began to rise. The course sequence usually ended with The Autobiography of Malcolm X (written with the help of a young Alex Haley), or Soul on Ice by Eldridge Cleaver; rarely, it would end with Martin Luther King's Why We Can't Wait or Why I am Opposed to the War in Vietnam. But regardless of its composition, an Afro-American literature course could soon be found in most top-rank educational institutions under a number of different guises and titles: ethnic literature; urban literature; or contemporary literature. The students in these classes, as well as the administrators at these various colleges, soon saw the need for more black faculty to instruct these courses. Thus, it was, that soon one was able to get a degree in Afro-American or African studies at major institutions; in the area of traditionally predominantly white universities, Boston University, Columbia, UCLA, and Ohio State University led the the nation in this area. Black students interested

in literature were encouraged to get a degree in Afro-American studies, with the promise that a job would be waiting even before the degree was in hand. Those who did not wish to have their degree in this one area alone were encouraged to make Afro-American studies their area of specialization, and, thus, along with any other subject they might be asked to teach, they could also teach the black literature course on campus. From all appearances, the stage seemed set for the full and permanent incorporation of Afro-American literature into the English curriculum sequence.

But the demise of the phenomenon of black studies courses as an integral part of the curricula happened even more quickly than its rise. Even the most vociferous critics of these courses and their composition could never have imagined the diverse onslaught the courses would have to face; nor could they have imagined how quickly many of the courses would fail. In 1984, one was hard-pressed to find more than a handful of major institutions who still offer the terminal degree in Afro-American studies; for advanced degrees, one may still have a concentration in any area, but as a graduate professor once said to me, "That black stuff won't be on their exams, so why should a graduate student study it?" At the University of California at Berkeley, Ishmael Reed, two-time National Book Award nominee and winner of the Rosenthal Foundation Award, cannot get a degree-granting Afro-American studies program started at his parent institution; at Dartmouth College, the off-campus student newspaper calls the Afro-American course offerings the "let's hate white people courses." Across the country, excuses, which have been scurrilous at best, have been given to cut back the number of Afro-American literature classes, or eliminate them all together.

But two occurrences in humanities departments throughout the country threaten to eliminate not only Afro-American literature classes, but also any other literature course which can in any way be deemed "non-essential." First, all humanities departments are hard-pressed for money; given this financial climate, the first courses deemed "non-essential" are those course offerings not considered to be a part of the standard corpus of literature classes. Thus, Afro-American literature classes fall to the budget knife, as do women's studies course and linguistics courses; though, the threat to the last two is in no way as great as it is to Afro-American literature courses.

Secondly, English departments are trying desperately throughout the country to become more practically useful to their students. This translates as giving the students a viable skill which can later be used in the difficult job market. The first skill to be imparted is a marketable compositional competence; after that, students must learn to write for technical areas, business, and for areas that are presently shrouded under the mystical title of "professional writing." The facts are irrefutable in both these problem areas. The humanities simply lack money; there is no way around that fact. Any thing which can be cut from the budget will be, and there is no sign that the humanities will do any better in the future, as more and more, the science and technical areas promise more employment and more dollars. Further, to survive, English departments must find some way of marketing the skills of their employees: the business of instructing English must survive if any professor is to have a job in these difficult times. At present, farming out our technical, business, and professional writing skills seems to be the most viable way of being self-sustaining, as well as

useful.

But what of those black faculty members caught in this maliase? One may rightly assume that whatever negatively affects the profession as a whole, affects the black instructor even more negatively and specifically. The horror stories are numerous.

Told that her Afro-American course offering was no longer "viable" for the department to continue, a black colleague of mine at a major institution regrouped and began to teach in the area her dissertation had concenred: Shakespeare and Elizabethan England. The students thought her not worthy of teaching the course; "What, after all," they argued, "could she possibly know about Shakespeare?" She managed to finish the semester, but since the Afro-American literature course was no longer "viable," and since she had had no training for the newly incorporated areas of professional writing, she chose to enter another profession which paid twice as much for less work and which offered none of the student abuse.

At another institution, a competent black teacher had a formal complaint lodged against her because she was "teaching that murder is allright." It seems that the teacher had included as one of her texts Richard Wright's Native Son. This teacher is now contemplating whether it is worth the effort to stay in such an ignorant and hostile atmosphere.

But certainly one of the worst experiences I have heard of concerns the black professor at Dartmouth who was labeled a racist because she maintained that injustice and racism do exist in the world. What have students of the humanities come to when they cannot accept or tolerate empirical truth?

Our universities and colleges can ill afford to lose talented

teachers, regardless of the subjects they teach. Our students, white as well as black, can afford to lose them even less. But these teachers are human only--although often they make super-human efforts in their profession. They cannot be expected to under-go the constant pressure and abuse which has become connected with teaching Afro-American literature in predominantly white colleges--certainly they cannot be expected to do so at the meagre salaries they are paid. Lost and uncertain, as are many white teachers who are caught in the budget squeeze and curriculum change-over, these black teachers look to their chairmen and adminsitrators for help.

But how many of us who have taught black literature have heard this refrain from those we have asked for help: "Well, certainly I see your point, but to be frank, I just haven't read much black stuff, so it's difficult for me to see what the students are objecting to." Or, you may have been unlucky enough to receive this even more disappointing comment: "Well, to be frank, I'll admit I don't see much relevance to the stuff you're teaching, but we're under pressure about these course offerings, so we have them. So you should be happy about that."

When the Afro-American teacher is squeezed out by these enclosing walls of ignorance by certain students and administrators, they leave a gap which the disinterested administrator or chairman does not attempt to fill. After all, these white adults, not unlike certain of their white counter-parts, have seen no need in the past to read the writings by or about blacks, and, thus, cannot see the necessity of a course which offers such writings.

What, then, are some of the things we can do about this extremely complex situation? As is always the case when the illness is curable by

the patient changing his own habits, the first step in remedying this situation begins with us. We, as black educators and students, must believe that Ntozake Shange is as important as William Shakespeare, that Ishmael Reed is as important as Jean Rousseau. Until we, ourselves, make that important leap over our own feelings of literary inferiority, we cannot begin to convince other people, who are much less interested in the literature, of the same fact. Once we believe in ourselves as essential to the American experience, others will come to believe.

Relatedly, we must demand of new black writers complete and total excellence. This is the only grid of censorship that I will agree to: the book must be well written. And once these writers have responded, as they presently do with amazing prolificness, we must embrace these writers and support them. We certainly do not need another book about Richard Wright, or another course offering which begins with spirituals and ends with Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. The new talents are there. It is up to us to believe in them.

Once this first step is accomplished, it will be easier for every one to impress upon those who make the decisions about course inclusion in the curriculum of the importance of keeping as an integral part of American literature those black writers whose experiences are just as important as any other well-writing American. We must remind the decision-makers, who so love the "facts" of history of the quotation from Maurice Merleau-Ponty; we must use his words to remind them that a factual history of the past is fought for, not given gratis. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> History takes still more from those who have lost every thing, and gives yet more to those who have taken every

thing. For its sweeping judgments acquit the unjust and dismiss the pleas of their victims. History never confesses. (Humanism, 127)

If the decision-makers still profess to be humanists, they can, thus, be reminded that humanism is broad, and encompasses all of that which is illuminating.

Thirdly, once the importance of keeping the works by black writers as a standard part of the literature corpus is shown, the next step should be to insist that those best qualified to teach this important area be left alone to teach it. By this, I do not mean that only blacks should be allowed to teach writing by blacks, but it should be obvious that those already trained in this area will be the best ones to teach the Afro-American courses at the present time. In this way, we will keep those people in the profession who might otherwise leave for less pressure amd more positive reinforcement. We must keep working the scholars who are trained in the area of Afro-American studies. This should be a goal of all of us who wish to see the reflections of black American accomplishments in our educational institutions.

Finally, I have nothing against the inclusion of professional writing courses as an essential part of the present and future curriculum. I, myself, am a teacher of technical and business writing. The English teaching profession must continue to survive on the college level, and the inclusion of useful and necessary responses to an America which runs on business seems only logical and self-sustaining. Once again, English teachers, the most diversely talented people in America, must add another area of expertise. Anyone who wishes to teach English for the up-coming 20 years should know something about

professional writing and writing on a computer. It only makes sense to offer your employer as attractive a package as possible. But for the same reason, we must not give up on the fact that Afro-American studies courses should be a permanent part of the English literature curriculum.

My outline here, I fear, has only presented more hard work to a people who have already had more than their share of hard work without just compensation. But we must depend on ourselves; this means hard work; and pursuing the steps I have outlined here will make it possible to eventually become the decision-makers, and not just remain those who constantly ask to be considered in the decisions made. As my great-great-grandmother said, she who saw nine generations of black people come and go after she was born on a Fayette County, Tennessee share-cropper's farm in 1895: "Work, study, prepare; then bet on your own horse and ride him yourself."

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